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# Making and Mindfulness: How Process-Oriented Tasks Encourage Reflection and Lead to Recovery

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# How Process-Oriented Tasks Encourage Reflection and Lead to Recovery

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My Senior Independent Study (I.S.) project is heavily motivated by my interest in trauma; specifically why traumatic events disrupt one's life and emotional experience so deeply, and how one recovers from traumatic events. After my own experience with trauma, I found that the repeated and involuntary memories of my experience and the anxieties created from those memories were the most debilitating. Trauma is defined in various ways, ranging from vague generalizations to incredibly specific definitions. Dr. Karen Saakvitne, a trainer and advocate for traumatic stress education at the Sidran Institute, defines trauma as, "The unique and individual experience of an event or enduring conditions in which the individual's ability to integrate his/her emotional experience is overwhelmed and the individual experiences (either objectively or subjectively) a threat to his/her life, bodily integrity, or that of a caregiver or family."[1] Traumatic events are so disruptive to our everyday routine, and sense of continuity, that to return to "normal," daily life seems unrealistic and impossible. Many times, counselors, self-help books, websites, blogs, etc. will encourage getting back to routine, doing things that are relaxing, and reflecting (e.g., writing in a journal, meditation): all are little steps one can take to begin feeling more "normal." This is where this project was born – in looking at the relationship between making and mindfulness, and how that aids recovery.

To prepare for this project, I researched trauma and its effects, while simultaneously looking into art therapy techniques and process art from its inception in the early 1960s to how it's used by contemporary artists.[2] Art therapy techniques and process art are actually quite

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[1] Karen Saakvitne, Sarah Gamble, Laurie Pearlman, and Beth Lev, *Risking Connection: A Training Curriculum for Working with Survivors of Childhood Abuse* (Baltimore: Sidran Institutes Press, 2001).

[2] *Artsy*, a website that acts as an art education resource, defines Process Art as "the movement [that investigated and documented] the artistic production process, often intentionally leaving exposed on the final form the traces of its creation."

related. Although art therapy aims to encourage psychological and emotional progress, process art by nature shares those benefits, while also visibly portraying elements of time, labor, and chance or randomness. I have found that doing repetitive or mindless tasks helps develop mindful thinking and reflection, which gradually helps aid recovery. For my I.S. project, I created a series of sculptures and drawings that follow a traumatized mind through the complex emotions and experiences of the aftermath of a traumatic experience.[3] The pieces that comprise this body of work portray elements needed for the recovery process including time, reflection, strength, growth, and transformation, but also elements that occur due to the recovery process like progress and challenges of ability or will. My goal is not only to show how process art stimulates mindfulness, but also gradually to encourage viewers to reflect on how the pieces were made and the time spent making them.

Because this project is based in process, I believe it is necessary to discuss the evolution of my ideas, and the process of making the pieces, while also discussing background information centered on trauma, process art, personal experience, and art therapy. Early in the project, I wanted to focus on post-traumatic identity, and how trauma drastically changes a person's sense of identity. Relating natural processes of metamorphosis, erosion, decay, and survival to the emotions and experiences that occur during the aftermath of a trauma seemed like a good place to start. I became interested in the imagery and symbolism of cocoons, skins, and shells, however such imagery was too obvious. Instead, I focused on the impact of such environmental processes of metamorphosis, erosion, and decay.

I found my interests focused more on the impact trauma has on an individual, rather than the metaphorical, environmental processes. The more I researched trauma, the more interested I

[3] I am referring to my own experience with trauma.

became in the emotions and experiences that occur in its aftermath, which required me to reflect on my experience with trauma. From there, I noticed all of these connections between trauma, reflection, art, and recovery. After a traumatic experience, many children and adults find it difficult to express themselves verbally. The Family Youth & Services Bureau's article on "How Arts Can Aid Trauma Recovery" explains that an effective approach to getting someone to express his or herself more easily is giving him or her an activity that is expressive in nature. Drawing, sculpting, storytelling, singing, etc. allow us to access emotions we might not understand how to verbalize.[4] In the Foreword of *The Healing Flow: Artistic Expression In Therapy*, Vivian Darroch Lozowski explains how our eyes and our mind communicate without using language to create a physical image. When we create, we are in constant communication with our mind, which means we are reflecting on our thoughts and past experiences.[5] The best visual examples of reflection in my work, are the long crocheted strips of fabric. Knitting and crocheting are great examples of reflective, creative activities that are done in everyday life. The repetitive actions of wrapping, knotting, and pulling fabric relieve stress and tension, while allowing one to move one's hands mindlessly. I made three crocheted pieces I am titling *Continuity/Disruption in White*, *Continuity/Disruption in Cream*, and *cut, tie, wrap, pull, repeat*; the knitted pieces showcase a practical coping method, while also focusing on time spent making, labor, making experience, and progress.

To make these pieces, I used a mixture of white and cream-colored muslin along with similar fabric found in secondhand stores to make hand-crocheted rectangular strips. I did not

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[4] "How Arts Can Aid Trauma Recovery," *Family Youth & Services Bureau*, accessed March 14, 2016, http://ncfy.acf.hhs.gov/features/thinking-creatively-family-and-youth-work/art-therapy.
[5] Schnetz, Martina. *The Healing Flow: Artistic Expression in Therapy: Creative Arts and the Process of Healing: An Image/word Approach Inquiry* (London ; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2005), 11-12.

predetermine the length of each strip; instead, I decided they were finished when they intuitively felt complete. The point of this piece was to show, physically, time passing through a manifestation of a repetitive action — crocheting. What the finished pieces do not exhibit is the time spent getting them to the point of crocheting. Overall, I purchased over 100 yards of slightly different light colored fabric in all shapes and sizes, but I prepared each piece – prior to crocheting – in the same manner. I cut the muslin into approximately one-and-a-half to two-inch wide strips. Once cut, I would take about 4 or 5 of the strips and cut each end into a point by trimming off the corners. Then, after making all the strips pointed, I would tie the ends together. I did this so the strips would tie together easily and not leave bulky knots. After tying them together, I had one long strip, which I used to crochet the piece. Once I ran out of the long strip, I then used the resulting single strip to crochet the piece and repeated the process of cutting, tying, and knitting. It a mind-numbing cycle of work (preparing the strip to crochet) and mindful play (the act of crocheting). I really enjoyed crocheting the long strip, but I dreaded doing the work to get to that point. Every time I had to stop to cut more fabric, I felt my thought process was being disrupted. This sense of disruption perfectly reflects the whole concept behind this project – that trauma disrupts the continuity of a person's life; hence I named two of the sculptures *Continuity/Disruption*.[6]

Originally, I planned to make one big tapestry out of the roughly five, 8 to 12 inch wide strips, by hanging them vertically side-by-side and pinning up folds at various lengths, so that they created a large textured wall piece (see Figure 1). But after hanging the pieces in the gallery, I decided to hang them separately and horizontally. I made this decision because it makes the pieces more visually interesting, and it allows me to stretch them out and exhibit their

[6] I made one crocheted piece in white, and one in cream, therefore I named the white piece *Continuity/Disruption (in white)* and the cream piece *Continuity/Disruption (in cream)*.

varying lengths (see Figure 2). This approach naturally encourages viewers to walk alongside them, providing them an opportunity to sense time passing (figuratively and literally) and reflect on the process and time spent making each strip. Hanging the pieces horizontally exposes more of each actual piece that would otherwise be hidden under large folds. Having the work spread out allows the viewer to see every little twisted motion, and that makes them think about the time-spent making. Time is a huge part of process. There is a much easier, quicker way of making pieces like this, but I chose to cut out strips that were about two feet in length and tie hundreds together. By choosing the more time consuming method of crocheting, my hope is that the viewer will understand the relationship between time and progress.

The process of recovery is not a quick process. It takes patience and perseverance. Traumatic memory plays a role in lengthening this process. Traumatic memory refers to the memories of trauma that sometimes cause the individual to relive the trauma; these can be as terrifying and impactful as the traumatic event itself.[7] Reliving trauma daily, or as often as these memories arise (which can be very often) makes it difficult to heal and move forward. Susan Brinson, author of *Aftermath and the Remaking of a Self,* and a rape survivor, explains that "narrating a traumatic memory can help to diffuse it."[8] All the pieces I discuss here permitted me to exist in a reflective state during their creation. The time I spent with each piece, while carrying out its respective process, contributed to decreasing the amount of traumatic memories I was experiencing. With each new piece I uncovered unique realizations and connections between the process of making and the process of recovery.

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[7] Brison, Susan J. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2002), 69.

[8] Brison, Susan J. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2002), 71.

*Build[ing] Up* consists of five long and linear hanging sculptures made of knitted plastic, latex paint, joint compound, paraffin wax, and white and yellow beeswax. I came to this piece while trying to execute another idea. Originally I wanted to make a hollow cocoon-like structure by making walls out of knitted plastic. I had old plastic sheeting lying around in my studio, so I decided to cut it into thin strips, tie the strips together, and arm-knit a teardrop shape out of it. Initially, I attempted to keep the piece flat, so that the walls did not collapse, but I ended up enjoying how the flat piece evolved into a long tapered cord or rope. To preserve the curves and folds that occurred when I hung the piece from the ceiling, I covered the forms with yellow latex paint by running it through my paint-filled hands.

The paint helped to stiffen the plastic, but also compacted the piece and made it thinner. I liked the bulk it had before I applied the paint, so I decided to add handfuls of joint compound to bulk up certain areas. At this point, I had to let the joint compound dry. After the joint compound dried, I thought an interesting way to build on top of the joint compound would be to pour melted wax on the piece. I thought the wax would provide a nice film over the entire piece while also collecting in certain areas. One thing I did not anticipate was how the poured wax always followed its previous pour paths. What I mean is that even if I altered where I poured the wax, it gravitated to a previous pour path, and it would layer over that path. That caused wax to bulk up in certain areas while leaving the understructure exposed in others. At first, I started with paraffin wax, but then experimented with layering white and yellow beeswax. While I continued to use paraffin wax and both white and yellow beeswax on these sculptures, I varied the method of application (sometimes I would start with yellow beeswax, sometimes I combined paraffin and white beeswax, etc.)

After making one of the hanging sculptures I thought it looked isolated. So much texture and color variation can occur in this pouring process, I thought by making a series I could intentionally add variation, while also showcasing how the materials behaviors vary depending on circumstance. I started by adding two more components, so I had three pieces hanging together. Three still seemed like too few; I also needed to add variation to their respective lengths and textures. I decided to make two more, so I have five sculptures in this series to show the variation of texture, length, pour path, etc. while also not overwhelming the viewer (see Figure 3). Although the individual components deserve distinct attention from one another, *Build[ing] Up* should be read as one piece.

The artist Petah Coyne's work was very influential and informative to [insert title of piece], although I had already made one or two of the forms before I discovered her work. The treatment of the wax on *Build[ing] Up* is very reminiscent of her hanging wax pieces (see Figure 4), however has influenced my work most is her use of ambiguity.

*Chicago Tribune* art critic, Alan Artner, wrote an article about an exhibition of Coyne's from 2005. In this article, he talks about her large black wax sculptures suspended in space. He explains that these dark masses resemble "once-living things such as dismembered, decaying animals" and "decomposition and death," which I assume he is attributing to most if not all the pieces.[9] In this exhibit, Coyne included two of her white wax sculptures, which Artner did not mention in his article.[10] Talking about the relationship between the white and black forms is extremely important when viewing Coyne's work because of the connection between life and death. Somehow, the white wax sculptures also evoke a sense of decay, and they too are

[9] Alan Artner, "Coyne's work pushes buttons: Shapes and materials evoke sense of decay," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL), May 19, 2005.
[10] I found an image of her 2005 exhibit at the Sculpture Center. I assume that she showed the same pieces at the exhibit in Chicago a few months later.

suspended in open space just as ominously as the black pieces. Similarly, when taking a closer look at the darker wax sculptures, they feel somehow still very much alive. That kind of ambiguity is something that is incredibly difficult to capture. With my wax pieces, I looked to Coyne's work to help inform how to keep my pieces both neutral and ambiguous. Ambiguity allows for further inspection and thought and it makes viewers mindful.

When I look at these pieces in their current state, and as a group, I think about this "play on words" that I have come up with that I have used to name the piece. I initially thought of these pieces as showing physical build up and weight, but I now look at them as an example of building something up and growth: build up as an effect versus building up as an action. The play on semantics is a very interesting transformation because I used to think of *Build[ing] Up* as portraying something heavy and overwhelming, but after sitting with these forms for a while, my view has shifted to one that is much more uplifting and positive. *Build[ing] Up* also exhibits transformation through the use of materials, which references the transformation that occurs during the recovery process. The materials used in this piece are an unusual mixture – one rarely thinks of painting plastic sheeting or coating it with joint compound. When two unusual materials are combined, an entirely new one is created. For example, covering the plastic sheeting in paint altered the appearance and texture of the plastic that made it resemble paper or fabric. The material behaves uniquely, and it takes on a whole new meaning. That is very present in this piece. To understand how I used the materials, the viewer needs to inspect the pieces closely. My hope is that by drawing in the viewer to further inspect the piece, he/she will reflect on how I constructed the piece and the behaviors of the materials.

Thorough experimentation of materials is something I learned about from researching Eva Hesse. She is one of my most important artistic influences, especially in the context of this

project. Hesse is often attributed as being a Post-minimalist and Process artist from the 1960s, and is known for using materials such as latex, wire mesh, wood, various fabric and fiber, metal, rubber, resin, fiberglass, cardboard, and like materials, which were considered atypical art materials at that time.[11] When Hesse explored materials, she pushed them beyond what they were designed to achieve. This ability to push materials beyond their typical usage is most apparent in her use of latex rubber. Latex was originally used as a mold making material, but Hesse would spread it over paper and cloth to make rubber coated sheeting (see Figure 5). She would dip metal bits into it. She would fold, crumple, cut, and manipulate it in any and every way she could to see what would happen.[12] I wanted to attempt to visually show transformation somewhere in my project, but I was unsure of how to do it. I thought back to my concept and how an experience of trauma transforms one's life. Then, I thought about how an unusual treatment of a material or materials, can transform the nature of certain materials, or give them new meaning and presence. That translation of transformation felt most relevant to this project. An action or event, such as a traumatic experience, can fundamentally change a person's outlook on life, just as pouring wax over a piece of plastic changes the nature of that material. It is important to mention that these changes are not negative; in fact, change allows for more opportunity and more transformation.

When all of these emotions, thoughts, and memories arise post-trauma, one can feel out of control. A *Psychology Today* article from 2001 discusses the four stages in recovering from a traumatic experience. The first stage is where the shock of the trauma overwhelms the nervous

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[11] "Eva Hesse," *National Museum of Women in the Arts*, accessed March 14, 2016, http://nmwa.org/explore/artist-profiles/eva-hesse.
[12] Fer, Briony, and Eva Hesse. *Eva Hesse: Studiowork* (Edinburgh : New Haven: Fruitmarket Gallery ; Distributed by Yale University Press, 2009).

system, and "it shuts down to just basic" functions, meaning one's body is still functioning physically, but one cannot sense anything emotionally. The second stage happens when the individual talks about his/her experience and confirm its reality, which causes a return of emotions. The third stage calls for "constructive action" or action that "restores a sense of control." The fourth and final stage involves integrating the trauma into one's life experience and trying to learn and grow from it.[13] In my artwork, I focus on stage three, because that is the turning point in the healing process. In my experience, getting that control back helped me become stronger. My experience made me an incredibly weak person; one that felt out of control all of the time. I recently created a piece that required control (on my part), but that symbolizes power.

*Constructive Action* is made of plaster, chicken wire, lace tablecloth, plastic sheeting, and PVC pipes[14]. It is a plaster monolith that stands at about six feet tall. In the early stages of this project, I made smaller scale plaster towers (18 to 24 inches tall) as a control exercise and as a challenge to see how tall I could make them without falling or before the plaster hardened (see Figure 6). I abandoned those sculptures for a while, but in early spring when I hung my pieces in the gallery to review them outside the studio and play with installation, I found the space felt somewhat sparse. I then wanted to include at least one large freestanding sculpture, and I thought back to these plaster tower exercises.

Executing the construction of the larger form was much different than the smaller models. I started with a simple plywood circle about 10 to 12 inches across as my base, and started mixing plaster. I placed a thin PVC pipe in the middle of the first few layers of plaster as

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[13] "Recovering from Trauma." *Psychology Today*. Accessed February 26, 2016. http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200308/recovering-trauma.

[14] *Constructive Action* received its name after the third stage of recovery in the *Psychology Today* article.

something to build around. As I was layering the plaster on the wood and building it up, I noticed how heavy it was getting, and I had barely completed a fourth of what I had planned. I decided to make hollow chicken wire cylinders to build up plaster around them to make it lighter. But before adding plaster to the cylinders exterior, I needed to pack the chicken wire cylinders with something light to fill the inner space while also providing support. I found something resembling an old plastic tarp and an old lace tablecloth to fill the cylinders and also to add strength to connection points. I used the lace at the bottom, where the chicken wire met the plaster, because I wanted something that the plaster could permeate through for added strength. Once the plastic was inside the cylinders, I packed on the plaster, making some parts bulkier than others, and leaving part of the interior wire layers showing.

When making this piece, I felt incredibly powerful and strong, not mentally or emotionally, but physically strong. There is something about building a large and tall form that makes one feel powerful. My peers and advisor warned me that this piece might be read as phallic or as feminist commentary, but I never intentionally approached *Constructive Action* with a feminist agenda. That being said, it is fascinating to me that I felt so powerful and in control when making this. I wanted to make something that could stand on its own, without depending on a wall or the ceiling or a pedestal. "Independent", "strong", and "powerful", are words that traditionally are attributed as masculine, therefore it is an interesting interpretation of the work.

That being said, this piece was made more as a personal challenge. When working with plaster, there is a period of time, 10 minutes after mixing, where the state of the plaster has a similar consistency to thick frosting. This is the best time to sculpt plaster and model it like clay. Making this piece was a challenge of time, because the "frosting" state lasts for just a few minutes, but it was also a challenge of control. Can I control where the plaster goes before it

hardens? I ended up having some control over where the plaster went, but not very much. Because of how little time I had to work with the plaster before it hardened that also contributed to my lack of control. Recently, I decided to make a second plaster tower that is shorter but wider than *Constructive Action*. At least one more plaster sculpture would compliment the first by showing how the process of applying the plaster can vary, as well as my ability to control it.

My artistic influences for this piece came from several artists who are all connected. Louise Bourgeois was an active sculptor from the 1930s until about 2010, when she died. Interestingly, much of her work is influenced by traumatic events she experienced during her childhood.[15] Bourgeois made many large sculptures that often depicted literal genitalia, or resembled the shapes of genitalia, and she supplemented these pieces with feminist commentary about sexuality and the body.[16] Eva Hesse names Louise Bourgeois as one of her influencers, and Petah Coyne names both Hesse and Bourgeois as her influencers. This sculpture, in a way includes elements inspired by each of these artists. The shape and nature of the sculpture, is borrowed from Bourgeois, while the use of plaster as a malleable material comes from Hesse, and the overall treatment of the surface of the plaster, comes from Coyne.

Similar to my experimentation with plaster and the early, smaller plaster towers, I have made several drawings that I, again, consider a personal challenge. I manipulated scraps of wood by cutting them very small, or bending them, or sanding down one side. Then, I forced myself to use only the manipulated wood scraps as tools to cover the page, or make a pattern, or spread ink. I made my "ink" by mixing together charcoal powder and polycrylic. I chose this mixture so that I could make the ink transparent, and allow the layers of previous marks to show

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[15] "Louise Bourgeois Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works." *The Art Story*. Accessed February 26, 2016. http://www.theartstory.org/artist-bourgeois-louise.htm.

[16] Ibid.

through. With many of these drawings, I am adding ink in a crosshatch or grid-like system (see Figure 7). Layering the crosshatched marks creates a woven pattern, which references the repetitive, mechanical act of weaving, knitting, and crocheting. Although the drawings I created involve very systemic mark making, these drawings are very expressive.

During an impromptu critique, some of my peers found these drawings to be the most representative of trauma of all of my work. This notion could be attributed to the dark color and sharpness of the marks, or the aggressive way the marks were made (scratching, scraping, slicing, stamping). As I stated earlier, I approached these drawings looking to step out of my comfort zone of sculpture and make drawings, yet I found that these drawings mainly served as cathartic exercises. Using the wooden tool to scratch dark marks onto a piece of paper was an incredibly effective stress reducer, which is interesting because it was an aggressive or violent way of making marks. A few days later I was told by another peer that these drawings "looked traumatic."[17] I decided to observe the drawings and try to reflect on my experience making them, which is what patients of art therapy are instructed to do.[18] Making art is half of the experience; the other half is reflecting on what you made. Why did I choose to use that color? Why did I choose to make those particular marks? These drawings were made from an emotional place that is still not completely healed. It was a reminder that the process of recovery is ongoing, and it may never truly end.

I plan to hang the drawings in a salon presentation – clustered around one another – because they are not individual pieces. Like all of my sculptures, collectively they show variation that the materials and process allow. Alongside the cluster of drawings, I intend to

[17] A direct quote from one of my peers
[18] Davis, Barbara Jean. *Mindful Art Therapy: A Foundation for Practice* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015), 59.

hang the wooden drawing tools. The series of drawings are titled *Traumatic Line Variations*, and the tools are entitled *Traumatic Line Variations (Tools).* I wanted to keep the names almost identical so viewers know the two are connected.

Obviously the motivation behind my I.S. is incredibly personal, and at points in the year, I did not want to think about trauma, pain, or even recovery. I wanted to put the topic out of my mind. One of the main lessons that I learned from this experience is that my sense of feeling "recovered" varies from day-to-day. It is difficult for me to call this project finished, because I still have work to do on my recovery. I made incredible progress this year, and this project documented and helped get me closer to my end goal. That being said, I cannot definitively say if this process will ever end or if the feeling of complete recovery will ever arrive. I know that doing creating these sculptures and drawing are methods to get me closer.

To reiterate, trauma is most basically an extremely shocking event that disrupts one's life emotionally, physically, and psychologically. In order to recover from a traumatic experience, one needs to reflect on the traumatic experience and how it has impacted his or her life. Art therapists argue that making and viewing artwork allows for individuals to express feelings that are difficult to explain. This project introduced me to the world of process art and art therapy, which I would like to continue exploring. I was attracted to the emotional and mental benefits that art therapy techniques explain, but also to how time, labor, progress, and the maker's role are portrayed through Process art. This attraction to elements of process led me to focus on the actions of making and the psychological and emotional benefits that come from the experience of making. Approaching my Senior Independent Study Exhibition, scheduled on April 3, 2016, I am confident in the work I made over the last year, and I am excited to hear how viewers receive and interpret the pieces.

Figures

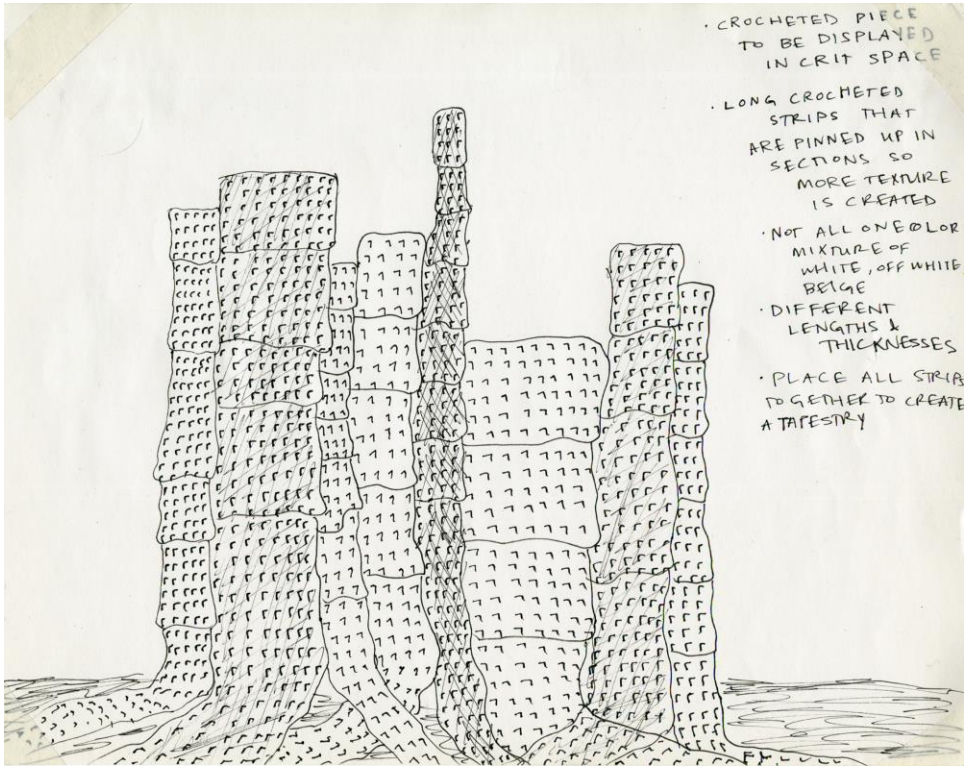


Figure 1. This is a sketch of my initial installation plan for my crocheted pieces

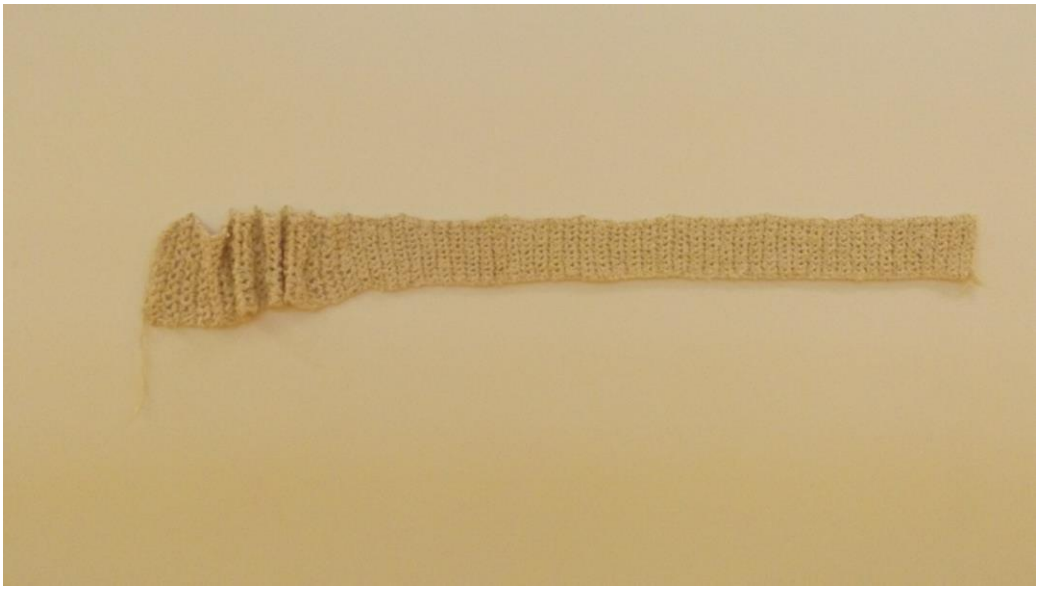

Figure 2. I intend to hang the final pieces in a similar fashion

Figure 3. *Build[ing] Up* in the earlier stages

Figure 4. Petah Coyne, *Above and Beneath the Skin*, SculptureCenter, January 16 – April 10, 2005

Figure 5. Eva Hesse, *Contingent*, 1969, National Gallery of Australia


Figure 6. These are the early tests for *Constructive Action*.

Figure 7. Detail of one of my drawings from *Traumatic Line Variations*

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